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ABSTRACT

Two companion studies addressing the information needs of the aging are discussed. Participants in the first study were 93 specialists in aging in four groups--library/information specialists who had achieved a reputation of working with the aging, educators/researchers in gerontology, policy-level administrators who were part of the governmental hierarchy in aging at the state and regional level, and service providers at the level of the area agency on aging. Answers to an open-ended question on how the information needs of the aging should be met were analyzed and compiled into a 40-item questionnaire. Participants were then asked to respond to each item on a scale ranging from "of no importance" to "of great importance." In the second study, 400 adults aged 65 and older were interviewed by telephone on the items in the questionnaire. Items identified by both specialists and the aging as important included: (1) better training for personnel who work with the aging; (2) more emphasis on listening to the elderly about their needs; (3) television, radio, and newspaper public service announcements; (4) senior centers as a means of information dispersal; (5) cooperative outreach programs by agencies that assist the aging; and (6) attention to the needs of the sight- and hearing-impaired. Other areas of concurrence and difference of opinion between the two groups are also highlighted. (MES)

HOW SHOULD THE INFORMATIONAL NEEDS OF THE AGING BE MET?

by

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OPINIONS EXPRESSED BY EXPERTS IN AGING AND OLDER ADULTS

Research question: How should the informational needs of the aging be met?

The EXPERTS and the OLDER ADULTS CONCURRED that the following ways of meeting informational needs were IMPORTANT:

--Better training for personnel who work with the aging;
--More emphasis upon listening to the aging about their needs;
--Television, radio, and newspaper public service announcements;
--Senior centers as a means of information dispersal;
--Cooperative outreach programs by agencies which assist the aging;
--Attention to the needs of the sight and hearing-impaired.

The OLDER ADULTS (but NOT the EXPERTS) believed that the following ways of meeting informational need were IMPORTANT:

--Announcements through the church or synagogue;
--Toll-free, 24-hour "hotline" telephone service;
--Easy-to-read information and application forms in large print about programs for the aging.

The EXPERTS (but NOT the OLDER ADULTS) believed that the following ways of meeting informational need were IMPORTANT:

--Greater accessibility to transportation;
--More emphasis upon one-to-one contact with older adults by agencies for the aging;

Relatively-speaking, the EXPERTS and the OLDER ADULTS CONCURRED that the following ways of meeting informational need were NOT IMPORTANT:

--The library and library programs and outreach;
--Computerization for use with the aging;
--Posters, flyers;
--Inserts enclosed in bills or letters in the mail;
--Information provided through younger adults at civic meetings or by school-age children who bring notices to elderly family members.

HOW SHOULD THE INFORMATIONAL NEEDS OF THE OLDER ADULT BE MET?

Why is this topic important? The rationale which I gave in 1982 in the opening page of my dissertation still remains true, and I would like to share this philosophy with you now:

These studies address information as a necessity for any segment of society in an increasingly complex world. The exchange of information and the will to communicate are fundamental to all people regardless of age, but the function and structure change as the individual grows older and becomes more dependent upon others for satisfaction of basic needs. Because of the special characteristics of some elderly persons--increased leisure time, reduced income, and declining health--their information needs are enhanced at the very time that circumstances may force a narrowing of their horizons. As the aged become more socially isolated, they have less opportunity to seek answers from the traditional source of everyday interchange with other people. Because research has shown that many isolated people can be found among the aged, special help through social and/or private programs is needed. Despite the growing need for communication between and among older adults as individuals, within families, and within community agencies and organizations, the available literature generally stops short of analyzing the full impact of this need. The present studies seek to delineate the boundaries of this neglected concern,

focusing specifically upon the means by which the information needs of the aging should be met.

I will discuss two companion studies today. Both have as their research question, "How should the information needs of the aging be met?" This question was first taken to specialists in the field of aging, "experts," if you will, drawn from the ranks of library/information specialists with interest and background in service to the aging, and from the ranks of gerontologists in several strata of responsibility. After receiving the experts' feedback, the question was asked of older adults themselves, to determine if their answers were the same as those of the experts. When their answers are similar, we can infer that informational needs of the aging are being met in effective ways; when their answers differ, we may be led to reassess what means are being used to reach the older adult. Th results of the two studies do indicate substantial degrees of both agreement and disagreement, indicating that we may wish to reassess at least some of our policies in the realm of informational outreach.

The first study was carried out over a full year in 1980 to 1981. Two hundred specialists in aging in four distinct groups were asked to participate in a three-part Delphi survey. Ninety-three individuals eventually remained throughout the entire study. The four groups were as follows, in roughly equal proportions: first,

library/information specialists who had achieved a reputation for working with aging in library programs or through research and publishing; second, educators/researchers in gerontology who were located in universities and colleges that were members of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education; third, policy-level administrators who were part of the governmental hierarchy in aging at the state and regional level; and fourth, service providers at the level of the area agency on aging.

The participants were first asked to respond to an open-ended question, "How should the informational needs of the aging be met?" Their answers were analyzed and compiled into a 40-item questionnaire that asked participants to respond to each item on a scale ranging from "of no importance" to "of great importance." Finally, the participants were given feedback on the results of the 40-item survey; they were told both the mean and the degree of consensus (the interquartile range), as well as their own response, and given the opportunity to change their minds if they would like. (Very few chose to do so.)

The second study was carried out at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte through the University's Urban Institute. By random digit telephone interviewing, 400 adults aged 65 and older were queried on the forty items from the first study, restated in lay person's terms. In addition, demographic questions were asked to define the sample in order to determine generalizability. The study

was made possible by a faculty research grant and carried out in the summer of 1984.

A comparison of the results obtained from the two groups is given in your handout, and will be highlighted by transparency. Only one item on the 40-item survey was universally recognized by both groups as being of prime importance: better training for personnel who work with the aging. In the ranking as a whole, this ranked fourth in importance by the experts and second in importance by the older adults. A second item getting notable consensus was the request to have more emphasis upon listening to the elderly about their needs, but the ranking was significantly different. The experts gave it #10 out of 40 items, while the elders placed it first in importance. It was also the item about the which the elders as a whole agreed most completely, e.g., the interquartile range was the smallest, meaning that consensus was the greatest. Television, radio, and newspaper public service announcements ranked #7 for the experts and #5 for the elders. Senior centers as a means of information dispersal ranked #6 for the experts, #7 for the elders. In the breakdown of experts, policy-level administrators more than any other group of specialists were likely to rate this of great importance, suggesting that it is receiving great attention in the national hierarchy. Cooperative outreach programs by agencies which assist the aging ranked second in importance by the experts, and #9 by the elders. The second ranking by the experts suggests a

call for help by understaffed and overworked agencies, who hope to call upon others with similar constituency to help carry the load. Attention to the needs of the sight and hearing-impaired ranked tenth by both the experts and the elders, overall, but in the breakdown of the experts, the service providers were much less likely to have considered this an important item. This is disconcerting in view of the fact that service providers are at the area agency on aging level, and thus closest to working directly with elders; it seems to suggest a lack of sensitivity on the part of sometimes poorly-trained personnel.

Moving to the next category, the older adults but not experts believed that the following ways of meeting informational need were important: The most notable difference was in the attitude toward the church or synogogue. Elders placed announcements through the church or synogogue third in importance among the 40 items, while experts listed it #19, almost midway in importance. This may partially reflect the fact that the survey of the elders was carried out in Charlotte, North Carolina, a part of the so-called Bible belt, but in my judgment this is not the whole answer. It appears smart to bring the clergy into the mainstream in serving elders and in meeting their needs; younger individuals who are now specialists in the field of the aging appear to have overlooked this rich resource. A toll-free, 24-hour "hotline" telephone service ranked fourth with the elders, but a lowly #28 with the experts.

This appears to meet the needs of the elders to get help quickly in an emergency; other studies have shown that elders feel especially vulnerable and safety-conscious. Toll-free numbers are so much in evidence in society these days that it is surprising that little more has been done with this for the aging. Finally, easy-to-read information and application forms in large print about programs for the aging were #13 in importance for the elders, #29 for the experts. This is suggesting a need for simpler instructions and also an attention to sight-impairment; surely government regulations are complicated, and this appears to be a call for help on the part of elders, many of whom qualify for programs but do not always know how to proceed.

The third area of comparison reveals those areas that the experts felt were important, but that the elders thought were much less important. Surprisingly, in my study, elders did not appear to think that greater accessibility to transportation was necessary to allow them to participate in programs. Experts, on the other hand, placed this first in importance, and it is almost universally believed that they are right; other studies querying elders have seemed to bear out this belief. It is difficult to argue with the ranking of fourteenth given by the elders; when studying the change between elders and the experts, it was in the entire study third from the bottom in measuring the difference between consensus afforded that item by the two groups. Charlotte, the site of the study, has a widespread, up-to-date

transportation system, consisting of buses, but no subway. Perhaps specialists have overestimated the need for transportation by elders as a group because the need of a few who lack the means have been so visible. A finding that will be met with pleasure by hard-pressed agencies on aging and libraries that seek to serve is the fact that elders do not consider one-to-one contact to be essential. Elders placed this eleventh in importance, while the experts, chastizing themselves, placed it third in importance.

Finally, there is a category of comparison that was found to be relatively unimportant by both experts and the elders. In a finding that will not be met with pleasure by librarians and information specialists, the library, its programs and its outreach, were squarely in this category. Only four items on the 40-item questionnaire were about libraries per se, and in the ranking, all four were in the bottom 10 out of 40 in importance. Only librarians perceived their activities to be of importance in the overall scheme. If we want to redress this, we must see that our expertise is recognized by both other experts in aging and the elders whom we seek to serve. Computerization for use with the elderly was likewise downplayed in importance; because the studies were carried out from 1980 to 1984, it is possible that there would be some change now, but we should not overestimate this. The fear of technology is strong enough among younger

adults that we must not assume that elders will take too easily to these new devices, whether in libraries or elsewhere. Posters, flyers, inserts in the mail were all discounted as ineffective means of getting information to elders. Finally, an intergenerational motif was also rejected, the idea that information might be provided by school-age children to their older family members or by other adults who attend civic meetings.

This talk has highlighted the major areas of concurrence and difference of opinion. In all, more than 40 suggestions were queried, and statements by both experts and the aging recognized that there can be no small group of ways that will work: a large mix of communication aids will be needed to see that all of the various information-seeking patterns of the aging are addressed. One aside by an expert is meaningful at this junction: She said, "PR just makes me tired!" She was viewing the need to get out the information to be a public relations function, and at this point of filling out my questionnaire, she was typically frustrated. There are not easy answers, but we cannot just remain "tired." We must work together to assist this rapidly-growing segment of our society in the best way possible. Only then can we be assured that the informational needs of the aging will be met. Librarians and gerontologists in particular need to talk with each other. Both the first study discussed here, carried out in 1982, and another doctoral study by

Elliott Kanner in 1972, highlighted this need for greater communication between the two groups. Perhaps we are coming to this; I would like to think so. The fact that we are addressing the needs of the elderly with two programs at this convention is heartening. But it is not enough. When you go back to your library, find out how much of the budget is spent on service to elders, and I do not mean only bookmobile or deposit collections in nursing homes. I can almost guarantee that you will be shamed by the low percentage. Take it upon yourself to do something about it; talk to your staff, meet with your board of directors. See that we get the word out. The aging are becoming a highly vocal element in our society, and it is overwhelmingly sad and disgraceful if we do not meet their needs in this most basic of commodities, communication.